

LENT 4
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32 - The Two Prodigals

The parable of the Prodigal son is a classic Jesus story where, bit by bit, his message draws a vivid picture of the kingdom of God. It's about human failure and the freedom God gives us, a freedom to wander away and then to return to faith. The parable can be summarized in six words: sick of home, homesick, back home!

There was an elderly man who had raised two sons and had worked diligently his whole life. Now, the younger of the two sons was impetuous by nature and said to his father, "I do not want to wait for my inheritance. Give me my share now." Life at home was far too constricting. He wanted to get away. He was just plain - "sick of home." We're never told why. It may have been the restraint of his kindly father. Maybe it was because of that dull, "too good to be true" older brother that made him restless. Perhaps the temptations of the big city were too enticing to ignore.

Whatever the reason, he wanted to break away, to taste life to the full, to be his own man. Staying at home cramped his style. He didn't want to lose out, to miss the best the world had to offer. There was nothing to keep him at home when the action was "all out there," just for the taking. He yearned for complete freedom and to do as he pleased with no one looking over his shoulder. This desire for complete moral freedom, for throwing off the shackles of the basic rules of life is no stranger to human beings of all times and ages. It was first recorded in Genesis, in the formative days of human existence, portrayed in the Garden of Eden.

The first humans became "sick of home" in their earthly paradise. God, created humankind as responsible beings, the climax of creation. Adam and Eve were placed in the Garden of plenty, and God himself said; "It was very good." At the centre of the garden was "the tree of life, the tree of knowledge of good and evil." They were instructed not to eat the fruit of that tree. God gave Adam and Eve a fundamental choice; to obey or to disobey.

Their freedom was limited by this one prohibition which eventually made them "sick of home." It really wasn't a restriction, but rather a boundary set for their own good. After all, true liberty is only found within bounds. And so, God provided the bounds for true freedom. Ever since that first crisis in the Garden, humans have longed for a freedom which wasn't really a freedom because it was outside the bounds of God's protective law and trust.

The tempter suggested to Eve, "Don't worry your pretty little head over divine commands. You don't have to live under that kind of restriction. There's a world out there to be experienced, delights to be tasted, and you can be on your own!" Adam and Eve fell for the freedom of not trusting God. It became the doorway to the loss of freedom itself, and some rather terrible consequences. They were the first prodigal son and daughter.

In Jesus' story, the father didn't argue with his son. He gave the son his inheritance. He would not force him to stay, or plead with him. He knew that home was no longer home

to a boy who had become “sick of home.” It's never easy to see a son or daughter turning their back on their family. It always hurts when those we love become “sick of home.”

The elder brother was the complete opposite of the younger son, yet he too was a prodigal in his own way. Although he stayed at home with his father; he too was “sick of home.” He was completely broken on the inside. Pride and vanity dominated him and it showed in several ways. This older brother was self-righteous. He had a "holier-than-thou attitude: he said to his father "I never disobeyed your command." Well, maybe never openly, but his so-called service to his father was done out of necessity, out of obligation, rather than out of love.

He was completely self-centred. Everything was all about him. He was filled with sinful ingratitude. The entire estate of his father was to be his. According to Jewish law, the younger son received one-third of the estate and the older son always got twice what the younger one received. And once the estate was divided and distributed, the younger son had no further claim on any inheritance.

The story now becomes a tale about, not one, but two prodigal sons, both “sick of home.” One had the courage to face his father, to leave home, and to test his independence. The other, just as unhappy, just as tempted, stuck around, performing his duties and probably harboring anger toward both his father and his brother. Both sons abandoned their father, one physically, and the other emotionally.

It wasn't very long before the younger son, now free to do as he pleased, began to feel “homesick.” In those first exciting days when money was plentiful, he scarcely gave a thought to what he had left behind. There were things to do, places to go, things to see, and all kinds of fascinating people to meet in this new world. He was a big spender and easily formed friendships. Life was a whirl of merriment. Life was a wild weekend that went on and on. But, finally the end came. It must have been quite a shock to him when his funds ran out and, lo and behold, his jovial, fair-weather companions were nowhere to be found! Then, another disaster struck - a famine.

Our prodigal was now facing a hard time: no money; no friends; no jobs due to the famine. In desperation he sold himself to one of the local farmers and was sent into the fields to feed pigs. And for a Jewish boy, to have to care for pigs was a disgrace. It was unthinkable. He was finally overcome with homesickness.

Satan is a hard taskmaster. When he's after his prey he disguises himself in the glitter of the world's tinsel, he tempts the unsuspecting. He deceived Adam and Eve in the Garden where they lost their innocence. The prodigal too, lost his innocence, his self-esteem, and his sense of worth. He hated himself for what he had done. Disillusionment set in. He seemed to have fallen into a great hopeless hole from which there was no escape. But, maybe there was!

The prodigal finally came to his senses. Hardship has a unique way of bringing people to

face facts. The boy reflected on the starvation he was experiencing and the plenty being enjoyed by his father's hired servants who had "food enough to spare." He now knew that the far country was not for him. He didn't belong there.

From being "sick of home," he had turned full circle, becoming "homesick." And there was only one place to go now, and that was "back home." He practised his speech of contrition and remorse. His sin, he told himself, had been against both heaven, meaning God, and his father. He recognized that he had forfeited all claims to be treated as a son and he looked only for the possibility of being treated like one of the servants.

"So he returned home to his father. And while he was still a long way off, his father saw him coming. Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him." The father didn't wait to hear his son repent. All he cared about was the son's return. He simply embraced him in love. This was a heavenly Father's welcome, a welcome of full grace.

Of course the boy didn't deserve it, not one little bit. But that isn't the point; the point is that he had been forgiven even before the father heard his repentance. In eastern culture, a kiss is a sign of forgiveness and a pledge of reconciliation. And here we see a boy who had been estranged from his father, was forgiven, and was reconciled to his father. We can never pay for our redemption; it can't be earned; it is a gift from God and it must be received as such.

This parable is about our own amazing salvation. The father said to his servants: "Quick - bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet." When we return to God in repentance and faith, the first thing God does is to place upon us the robe of righteousness. So when we are asked to repent, is it to earn the God's forgiveness? If that is the case, then repentance becomes a work, an effort where we are working to earn forgiveness. But, we know that our God is a God of unconditional love, a God of limitless forgiveness. So, because God unconditionally loves us, and because his limitless love is always ready to forgive us, we are motivated, compelled to repent, to feel regret, to feel remorse, to have a contrite heart.

But, what about the elder son? When he came home from work that night, he was confronted by a joyous party. He was urged by his father to enter into the joy of his brother's homecoming, but he was unmercifully unforgiving. There was hate in his heart for his brother and contempt for his father. He saw himself as a model son. Had he not slaved all these years for his father? He was proud and self-righteous. He was filled with an appalling spirit of envy and jealousy, the visible sign of a heart that was "sick of home." Sadly, he excluded himself from the celebratory meal. He could not face up to his own sinfulness, the secret sins of his heart and mind.

The story of the younger son ended happily. He was "back home." This is a parallel story of two prodigal sons, both of whom were "sick of home." But then the story parts ways. The younger son had the experience of being "homesick" and returned "back home," while the

elder remained in his unchanged condition. So how did it all end? We don't know. Perhaps Jesus left the story unfinished to throw out a challenge to all who heard it to decide how they themselves would respond.

This parable can be applied to our churches today. We have members who have wandered away from church and from God. God's way of life, God's teachings, laws, expectations, are not as enticing as the secular world that beckons. So, they leave. They are "sick of home." They wander away and are lost, becoming prodigal sons and daughters.

Then there are those who, like the older son, hang around, not out of love for God, but out of obligation, out of habit, because it is the thing to do, because they've always done it. Both types sadden God's heart. When the lost ones become "homesick" and come "back home" of their own free will and repent, God rejoices. God forgives and invites those who have remained to rejoice with him to welcome back the lost ones.

But, too often, we respond like the elder son. We say they don't deserve it; they weren't around to support the church; they didn't come to worship; they didn't serve on any committees. After all, we were always here; making sure the church would survive and flourish. What have **they** done to deserve God's grace and forgiveness? Some abandon God physically, and others abandon God emotionally. At times, we all become "sick of home." But, like the prodigal, there is always hope for us; hope that we become "homesick" for God's grace and love. Then we will find our way "back home" into God's loving and forgiving arms.

Jesus gave his life for us, so that we would always have a home; where we can find eternal love, grace, and forgiveness. And all we have to do is ask. Sick of home - homesick - back home. The question is, where are we in that sequence? Amen.